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Recognition, redistribution and relational equality

Mark Smith

Abstract

While relationships are central to a child and youth care approach to practice, the claims we make for them as defining the field cannot stop at an inter-personal level but need to consider their nature and purpose in wider context. In this chapter, I locate the idea of relationship within the debate in social theory around the relative merits of demands for recognition and redistribution. I go on to attempt to bridge these respective claims by advancing the need for affective or relational equality in enabling children and youth to take their place(s) in the world.

Introduction

Few would dispute that relationships are and ought to be at the heart of child and youth care (CYC), but it is right that some are questioning an over-emphasis on the inter-personal relationship and a failure to sufficiently locate this in wider context. Relationships, in and of themselves, are neither good nor bad - indeed, they can be either and perhaps both at the same time. So if, as a field, we want to pin our colours to the mast of relationship-based or relational practice then we need to be clearer about what we mean by relationships and what purpose they might serve that would justify building an occupational identity around such an idea.

In some respects, a tension between a focus on the individual and their wider context is not new and was evident in the very different early conceptions of social work advanced by the Columbia and Chicago schools, the former basing its methods around individual casework and the latter around more socio-educational approaches. One might think that CYC ought to align more readily with the Chicago model, which views social change as something that happens through everyday social processes, as many would argue to be a defining feature of a CYC tradition. Yet, in recent years there has been an increasing turn to psychologising and

individualising models of practice, often supported by proprietary programmes, claiming to address children and youth's problems. These do, generally, recognise the importance of relationships but tend to locate them within a psychological frame (Smith et al, 2017).

In this chapter, I consider relationships through a wider lens, within wider debates in social theory, specifically, that played out between Axel Honneth and Nancy Fraser (2003) on the respective merits of inter-personal recognition and political and economic redistribution. I take this further by introducing the idea of affective or relational equality (Lynch, 2009). This positions inter-personal recognition against a backdrop of the need for structural redistribution of resources but goes further to identify a role for relationships in providing access to the kind of social capital that facilitates connections between youth and their wider worlds. I go on to illustrate my argument through reference to my own reflections, as a foster carer, in CYC related practice.

Honneth's theory of Recognition

Axel Honneth is a German critical theorist associated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which has been home to a number of major 20th and 21st century thinkers. The aim of the Frankfurt School is to develop theory both to better understand and to change the social world. Mostly, this has involved significant structural analysis. Honneth (1995), however, emphasises the importance of the inter-personal sphere and the basis this provides for interaction in the wider world. He makes the case that human flourishing is built upon three pillars of love, rights and solidarity, each of which emerges through a struggle for recognition in the domains of family, civil society and the state. His theoretical model identifies three types of relation to self, which map onto his three pillars: self-confidence; self-respect and self-esteem.

The broadly ecological nature of Honneth's theory makes it a suggestive framework for social work, where a growing literature draws upon it (see Niemi, 2020 for the most recent). It has also been used in child care (e.g. Lausten, 2016; Thrana, 2016). I now go on to outline Honneth's three pillars.

Giving substance to love

The 'Love' pillar of Honneth's theory may be seen to have particular resonance in CYC, where there has been an upsurge in interest in the idea in recent years (see Smith, 2016). One of the difficulties with this, though, is that ideas of love can become sentimentalised if not rooted in any wider theoretical understanding of what love might be, how it might come about or how it might intersect with other facets of a child's life and experience. Honneth's work allows for such necessary grounding.

For Honneth, love refers to multiple sources of emotional connections among a small number of people. While it shares some features with attachment theory, Honneth's thinking owes more to Donald Winnicott's ideas about 'good-enough' parenting. Through the reciprocal interactions between 'mother' (Honneth uses inverted commas to denote the fact that it need not be the biological mother or indeed the mother at all) and infant, each acquires the capacity for affective approval and mutual encouragement. This quality of love, or emotional recognition allows a child to learn that they exist and matter, separate from others (Bainbridge, 2015). Here, Honneth draws on Hegel's (2018) ideas of identity being forged through the dialectical process of struggle with another or other(s). Through this, one becomes aware of one's own uniqueness and abilities and can develop a positive image and resultant self-confidence. The important point here though is that one's attitude towards oneself emerges through mutual recognition; it is a social process. This point is important for CYC and ought to take the field beyond a focus on individual therapeutic interventions towards a more broadly socio-educational identity that understands and works with the individual in social context.

Rights

Honneth's idea of rights is, again, more sophisticated than the legalistic and contractual rights discourses that are often applied to child care. Honneth links love and rights, arguing that the experience of being loved is a necessary prerequisite to becoming a bearer of rights capable of participating in the public sphere (Honneth, 1995). This experience of love, developed in the family setting, enables an individual to view him or herself as a subject

with dignity and moral worth. From this basis of self-confidence, rights become realisable in the process of an individual striving for self-respect, within a community of other rights bearers.

It is only at this point and through this process of struggle and negotiation within a wider community that a child might be able to avail of codified versions of rights. Attempts to offer children rights without recognising the basis of these in inter-subjective relationships risk become patronising and descending into tokenism. Legal rights, therefore, are not sufficient in facilitating children's participation in the public sphere. Rights, as love, cannot be demanded but, through their public character to empower the bearer, both enable the development of self-respect and legitimate the demand for mutual respect (Smith et al, 2017). There are complicated dynamics at play here that are rarely surfaced in policy or professional discussions on children's rights; to claim and to realise rights, youth need to feel self-respect and to afford that same self-respect to others. It is only then that they can participate meaningfully in the public sphere, as morally responsible agents. This sort of democratic participation, in turn, produces individuals who are reflective, tolerant of difference, sensitive to reciprocity and better able to engage in moral discourse (Fleming, 2011). Too often, in child care, we hear rights talk devoid of the acknowledgement that rights are not merely something to be claimed and grasped but are a wider public good.

Solidarity

Having gained self-respect as bearers of rights, youth can go on to enjoy recognition in the public sphere and the self-esteem that follows from this. Honneth's third principle, solidarity, posits that an ethical life is the basis for mutual esteem and shared values. Self-esteem is built on the respect one receives in the public sphere for what one does. Having one's contribution recognised by social networks, communities and groups to which one belongs helps to build pride and competence (Houston, 2016). Such recognition of competence enhances resilience and the ability to deal with difficulties in other areas of life. Solidarity, thus, builds both societal and, through this, self-esteem (Honneth, 1995). According to Thompson (2006: 76), Honneth's understanding of self-esteem is that individuals have the opportunity to earn esteem if 'their particular traits and abilities are in

tune with the values of their society'. The allocation of social esteem allows a person to articulate how they might make a valuable contribution to social life and become worthy members of society. There is a predominant communitarian rather than an individual dimension to this.

Disrespect

The converse of recognition is disrespect (Honneth 2014). Disrespect can emerge when there is mis-recognition or an unequal distribution of recognition. Inter-personal maltreatment can result in humiliation, shame and low self-confidence; denial of rights will lower self-respect and dissonance between an individual's way of life and that of wider society will place self-esteem at risk.

On the other hand, Honneth develops his theory to show how everyday experiences of misrecognition can provide the motivation to struggle against both economic and cultural injustices (Fraser and Honneth 2003).

Redistribution

Critics of Honneth claim that his arguments are too rooted in the realm of the inter-subjective. These claims were played out in a major debate between him and the American philosopher, Nancy Fraser (Fraser and Honneth, 2003). Fraser claims that the inter-subjective processes that Honneth describes play out in a political and economic context, within which access to resources is unequally distributed and that opportunities to experience recognition are correspondingly curtailed. And, in this, she has a point. The gap between the rich (especially the super-rich) and the poor has increased in recent decades. This has material consequences, when a person or a family's resources are insufficient to meet their basic needs and, in a climate of austerity, this is a very real experience for many families. Another consequence is around restricted access to what most children take for granted; in Scotland, for instance, one in six children are too poor to participate in a hobby, access to which might allow them to develop the self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem that are central to Honneth's theory.

Moreover, unequal social systems have ramifications that go beyond access to material or cultural resources; poverty, and more specifically, inequality are felt at a deep somatic level. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) make the case that structural inequality is experienced in status anxiety that has physiological manifestations, both leading to and perpetuating a range of health inequalities between rich and poor.

Fraser claims that Honneth's recognition theory needs be complemented with a theory of redistribution that explicitly aims at remedying economic injustice. Others have picked up on Fraser's critique to argue that Honneth's theory has resulted in a preoccupation with difference and with individual and group identity claims and that this prevents us from detecting those sources of injustice that reside in economic structures (Webb,2010).

This debate between Honneth and Fraser should raise some questions for CYC. While the characteristics of the field have been widened in the most recent revision (Garfat et al, 2018), one might argue that they play into the same critiques levelled at Honneth. They have been extended to include a variety of identity positions but do not develop any critique of the political and economic structures that perpetuate inequality. Yet, inequality is perhaps the defining feature of children and youth in state care, globally, and its ramifications have a profound effect on the nature and purpose of the relationships they might form and the outcomes they might experience.

Affective/Relational Equality

Fraser (2010) missing from refs asserts three 'conditions' of social justice: equalization of resources, respect and representation. While sympathetic to her identification of the need to surface economic and political context in any debate around social justice, I go on to suggest, following Cantillon and Lynch (2017), that there is something missing from this tripartite schema and this is the relational element. In her earlier work, Lynch (2009) makes the case for debates around equality to include a dimension of affective equality, which she describes as equality in the doing and receiving of love, care and solidarity (LCS). Affective inequality occurs directly when people are deprived of the love, care and solidarity (LCS)

they need to survive and flourish as human beings. This is important as, any concept of human flourishing cannot be reduced to the political and economic but also requires love, care and cultural solidarity. The absence of this produces negative outcomes: fear; a sense of being unloved and unwanted; anxiety and poor health.

From the carer's perspective, LCS involves physical, mental and emotional work that requires attentiveness, responsibility, commitment and responsiveness. It is not all plain sailing but takes time, competence, energy and can be both a burden and a pleasure. Also, because LCS is largely dispositional and is generated in intentions and feelings for others, it is uniquely personal; caring is inseparable from the care-giver and cannot be assigned to another without altering the very nature of the caring relationship. Systems that see care as a commodity to be parcelled into time slots or shift systems misconceive its relational and affective basis.

LCS involves affirming, supporting and challenging, as well as identifying with someone and supporting them emotionally at times of distress. It is undertaken in the everyday through practical tasks such as cooking favourite meals, listening to cares and worries, offering physical comfort, or even giving financial help if needed. In essence, it involves going beyond what has come to be seen as 'professional'.

Relational equality in practice

I now go on to illustrate, briefly, the importance of affective equality through reference to my own family's role as foster carers to an asylum-seeking youth (see Smith, 2020). Several years ago, we took on the care of a boy, Faisal, now a young man, while two of his friends from the same country of origin were placed in a group home. As a long-term residential care worker myself, I don't want to get into the respective merits of foster and residential care. But, in this case, the outcomes for our foster son have been better than those for his compatriots placed in a group home. Reflecting on this, the nature of the financial settlement that each local authority receives is the same; so, in that sense there is equitable distribution of resource. So, distribution itself is inadequate in explaining the difference.

What has, undoubtedly, been different is the nature of the relationships we have, for a variety of reasons, been able to offer. These have fulfilled different purposes; they have offered Honneth's experience of love, which has grown through the continuity of daily living and in the practical and affective practices outlined above. This has allowed Faisal's self-confidence to grow, which has provided a basis for the negotiation of rights and for the recognition of achievements in the public sphere, such as success in school and gaining a place at university but also in taking a political stance in respect of the situation in his home country. But this has not just happened; our role in encouraging access to rights and the experience of solidarity has been active and purposeful and has opened doors to the kind of social capital that has allowed Faisal to achieve what he has. In this sense, our relationships have served a purpose of connecting him to the wider world through a series of our own networks, which constitute a kind of social capital (Baron et al, 2000). It is no coincidence that high achievers from care systems report the presence of a special adult in their lives, who believed in them and who offered access to experiences they might not otherwise have had.

Conclusion

While acknowledging and starting from an appreciation of a human requirement for rewarding relationships, recent trends in CYC as in other areas of child care have tended to view relationships as largely inter-personal. Drawing on social theory rather than psychology, this chapter has sought to extend the way we think about relationships beyond the individual to encompass social, political and community contexts as sites for forging and negotiating these. This is a reciprocal, social process. Accepting this ought to push CYC to adopt a primarily socio-educational rather than an overtly 'therapeutic' approach to practice.

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